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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the antecedent correlates of library anxiety, specifically characteristics of library-anxious students and factors which place them at risk. The following factors were considered: gender; age; native language; year of study; academic achievement; course load; number of earned credit hours; number of library instruction courses; computer experience; study habits; employment status; distance between home and the library; frequency of library visits; and reasons for visiting the library. Students from two universities (n=493) were administered the Library Anxiety Scale (LAS), a 43-item 5-point Likert-format instrument which assessed levels of library anxiety. Data indicated that students with the highest levels of library anxiety tended to be male, undergraduate, not speak English as their native language, have high levels of academic achievement, be employed either part- or full-time, and visit the library infrequently. Recommendations include making both librarians and teaching faculty aware of the characteristics of high-anxious students, as well as increasing the accessibility of anxiety-reducing interventions which focus on developing affective skills. Particular attention should be paid to students whose native language is not English, and library instruction should be introduced at the high school level. (Contains 17 references.) (MES)

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Library Anxiety: Characteristics of 'At-Risk' College Students

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Library Anxiety: Characteristics of 'At-Risk' College Students

One of the major objectives of library instruction is to promote, to develop, and to maintain information literacy, such that students will become self-reliant library users who function effectively as independent lifelong learners. According to the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989), the information-literate individual "must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (p. 1). However, due to the overwhelming amount of information available from a variety of sources in today's academic libraries, students are faced with the task of using the library in new and challenging ways (Bostick, 1992).

Within the last ten years, library anxiety has been identified as a psychological barrier for many college students. Library anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling or emotional disposition, experienced in a library setting, which has cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioral ramifications. It is characterized by ruminations, tension, fear, feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, negative self-defeating thoughts, and mental disorganization, which debilitate information literacy (Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 1995).

Mellon (1986) proposed the first widely accepted conceptualization of library anxiety, which arose from a two-year qualitative study conducted on 6,000 undergraduate students.

Mellon's theory "has serious implications for basic skills curriculum design" (Wright & Larson, 1990, p. 106). Mellon found that for the majority of students (75%-85%), initial library research experiences induce anxiety, culminating in search-avoidance behaviors, which, in turn, prevent them from developing library skills. Specifically, some students become so anxious about having to collect information in a library that they are unable to approach the task in a systematic manner. Mellon theorized that feelings of anxiety stem from one or more of the following four sources: (1) the relative size of the library (the most prevalent cause); (2) a lack of knowledge about the location of materials, equipment, and the like; (3) how to initiate their library research; and (4) how to proceed. According to Mellon's theory, library-anxious students feel that (1) other students are adept at using the library, while they alone are inept; (2) their incompetence is a source of embarrassment and consequently should be kept hidden; and (3) asking questions will reveal their ignorance (Mellon, 1988). These students' reluctance to share their feelings of anxiety apparently can lead to instructors overestimating their students' library skills (Jacobson, 1991).

Although there appears to be widespread agreement that library anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon and that additional research is needed to document and expand the dimensions of the theory of library anxiety (Egan, 1992, Mech & Brooks, 1995), there is a paucity of empirical research in this area. Research on library

anxiety subsequent to Mellon's (1986) landmark study, has been largely theoretical in nature (e.g., Westbrook & DeDecker, 1993). Even studies which have used either quantitative or qualitative techniques have tended to focus on interventions (e.g., Bungard, 1987; Joseph, 1991; Kupersmith, 1987; Mellon, 1988; Zahner, 1992). However, before effective interventions can be implemented, it is important that classroom instructors and librarians are cognizant of the students who are most "at-risk" with respect to library anxiety. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the antecedent correlates of library anxiety. Specifically, the main research question which guided the study was: What are the characteristics of library-anxious students, and the factors which place them at risk? The following factors were considered in this study: gender, age, native language, year of study, academic achievement, semester course load, number of earned credit hours, number of library instruction courses undertaken, computer usage experience, study habits, employment status, distance between home and the nearest academic library, frequency of library visits, and reasons for visiting the library.

Subjects and Procedure

Two hundred and ninety-three mid-southern and 200 northeastern university students were administered the Library Anxiety Scale (LAS; Bostick, 1992). The LAS is a 43-item, 5-point Likert-format instrument which assesses levels of library anxiety. High scores on the scale represent high levels of library anxiety. A

Cronbach's alpha reliability of .80 and a three-week test-retest reliability of .74 were reported by the author (Bostick, 1992). For the present study, the reliability of the LAS, as measured by coefficient alpha, was .92. Since no difference in mean library anxiety level was found between students from the two universities (t = 1.50, p > .05), responses were combined. This culminated in a overall sample of 493 students. The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 60 years (mean = 21.8, SD = 6.1), with females comprising 62% of the sample.

Data Analyses and Results

A setwise multiple regression analysis revealed the following variables which contributed significantly (F = 5.17, p < .0001) to the prediction of library anxiety: sex (F = 2.19, p < .14), age (F = 3.36, p < .07), native language (F = 2.19, p = .14), grade point average (F = 2.74, p < .10), year of study (F = 3.84, p < .01), employment status (F = 2.71, p < .10), frequency of library visits (F = 9.43, p < .005), and reasons for using the library (F = 18.0, p < .0001). Specifically, students with the highest levels of library anxiety tended to be male, undergraduate, those who did not speak English as their native language, who had high levels of academic achievement, who were engaged in either part-time or full-time employment, and who infrequently visited the library. In addition, when library-anxious students visited the library, they tended to do so either to use the online/computer index, to return a book, to conduct a library search for a thesis/dissertation, to

obtain a book or article for an assignment, or to study for a class project.

Discussion

A number of researchers have suggested that library anxiety is a debilitating phenomenon which must be overcome by students in order for them to take full advantage of library instruction and library use (Kuhlthau, Turock, George, & Belvin, 1990; Mellon, 1986). This article provides a framework for librarians and teaching faculty to which to refer in their attempts to make libraries a more positive experience for students. The findings of this study add to the scant body of empirical evidence concerning library anxiety. Based on these findings, recommendations include making both librarians and teaching faculty aware of the characteristics of high-anxious students, as well as increasing the accessibility of anxiety-reducing interventions which focus on developing affective skills. Knowledge of the characteristics of library-anxious students, could facilitate instructional strategies which would reduce anxiety and thus enable students to exploit fully the resources available to them. It is further recommended that librarians and teaching faculty collaborate in order to reduce anxiety and support learning objectives.

The results of this study demonstrate that particular attention should be paid to students whose native language is not English. The high levels of anxiety reported by these students may stem from cultural differences, communication difficulties, and the

inability to conceptualize and to apply the English language system (Goudy & Moushey, 1984). In addition, uncertainties about what behaviors are appropriate, as well as what level of service is available may prevail for these students (#18). In any case, the present research findings support the contention that foreign students can experience significantly greater problems adapting to and using the library than do their counterparts (Goudy & Moushey, 1984). Although librarians cannot be expected to teach English to foreign students, they can and must provide assistance to these students with all aspects of the library search process, including experience in using periodicals, on-line catalogs, and computerized indexes. Relatively little has been written about foreign students' experiences with and attitudes towards libraries (Goudy & Moushey, 1984). In fact, the current study is the first to demonstrate empirically that students whose native language is not English experience particularly high levels of library anxiety.

The finding that freshman and sophomore students typically are the most library-anxious suggests that library instruction should be introduced at high school level. In this respect, college librarians should liaise with school librarians in order to provide effective library experiences for students prior to their entering college.

Although a relationship between library anxiety and frequency of visits was found, the causal direction is unknown. That is, it is not known whether infrequent visits increase anxiety levels or

whether high levels of library anxiety culminate in library avoidance. It is hoped that further research will shed more light on this and the other relationships found in this study.

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